

THE TOILER. By HENRY NORMANBY.

A grimly realistic picture of the terrible round of daily existence that is the fate of all too many members even of the most highly civilised communities.

WORK? His life was the very essence of it, the epitome and sum-total of unvarying labour. He slaved every day and all day long, without change and without cessation, without hope, yet without repining. He was up before the sluggard sun, away to his toil; and when he returned unto the place called home (God help him!) the sun had long since sunk to his slumber and night was abroad in the land. Oh, the unutterable weariness of it! the unchanging hopelessness of his lot—doing daily his appointed task. We hear much of the dignity of labour, but I confess I saw little of it in the bowed and weary figure shuffling by in the early hours, and returning yet more weary at the close of day.

His mission in life was to scrape hides in a Bermondsey tan-yard, a foul and noxious place, ridden with brimming pits, wherein lay slimy hides, each fastened to a chain for security and ease of handling. There were lime-pits and softening-pits, pits for cleansing and pits filled with tan. Some were covered with sodden boards, and between them all ran boards soaking with moisture and of evil reek. In corners were fearful piles of horns, with putrefying flesh attached, and near by was an unspeakable heap of cuttings—scraps of hide, ears, noses. In every place and during every minute floated an indescribably foul odour.

Armed with a large and curiously shapen knife, the worker leaned over an upright block of wood, whereon was stretched a hide, dragged soaking from one of the pits. Scraps, cuttings, and shavings all round him bore witness to his assiduity, and his dreadful skill testified to his many years of service. Here all day, and often late into the night, he worked, scraping off hair and other useless matter from immature leather.

Having finished his daily task, he oiled and hung up his knife, put on his coat, and went home. He lived (we speak of it in that way) in the basement of Sheridan-buildings, Tabard-street, S.E., and owned, among other dreary possessions, an infant and a wife. The infant differed in no wise from any other infant save in the matter of mass—it was inordinately small. The wife was a shiftless, drunken, dreadful creature, whose only claim to consideration was the fact of her womanhood.

The home of the man of whom I write consisted of two rooms, each

hideously squalid. One served for the office of drawing-room, dining-room, and kitchen ; the other was reserved for repose. The walls were garnished with coloured almanacs (given away at the grocer's), representing for the most part rural scenes of exceeding beauty, with gorgeous youths and radiant maidens disporting in the midst. It was the nearest approach to the country the toiler could obtain.

It was to this place that the worker turned when his taskmaster had for a while no further need of his services. Hither he came for relief to his weariness, for food to appease his hunger, for affection to lighten his soul. This unlovely spot was to him the oasis in the desert of life—it was holy ground, whereon his feet trod reverently.

Strange ! that the might of the wind and the splendour of the sun should have had no power upon this man ; that he should have willingly sold himself, body and soul, for a woman, a child, and two squalid rooms. From the bridge, which he sometimes crossed on Sunday mornings, could be seen great steamships coming in from the freedom of the sea, yielding up rich cargoes brought from fair and far-off lands, or setting out austere on adventurous wanderings. Day by day, through every vicissitude of weather, he tramped the same dreary streets to bury himself in the same horrible work-yard. Day by day the rains beat upon him, the winds mishandled him, and the cold shrivelled his bent body. The seasons brought change to the earth—green to the trees and flowers to the fields—but never came change to him ; never once did this hapless man pass out of the sombre detail of his inconsequent days.

His wife, a lazy, shiftless trollop, spent most of her time in gossip, in surreptitious journeys to the pawnshop and subsequent visits to the gin-palace. Under the inspiriting influence of cheap alcohol she became even more loquacious and clattered loudly of her rights and wrongs. She appealed to her fellow-slatterns for sympathy and support, and was graciously accorded both. This, veritably, was life, to drink hot gin-and-water and clatter without let or hindrance.

And every day the sun gave his benison to the earth, and at eventide the winds breathed theirs. In sequestered woodland places the violet veiled its unutterable beauty and the dews of morning slept in the red hearts of awakening roses. Far overhead, through the deepening blue, sailed the majestic cloud-squadrons, summoned and marshalled by the wandering wind ; no toilers they, those mystic legions, going gloriously through the soft serenity of space. From the uttermost ends of the earth they came—from the fragrant plains, from mountain fastnesses, in from the heaving hills of the sea, going for ever onward over the silent, resting earth ; watching dispassionately the beauty of the fields, the squalor of cities, and the pitiable condition of men.

At length Calamity, always man's familiar, came upon the toiler, and he fell sick. His malady made rapid progress ; but he still dragged himself to the tan-yard and painfully leaned over the upright block of wood, since he could not afford the luxury of being too ill to work.

The drunken wife made an additional grievance of her husband's misfortune, and complained to her sympathetic listeners at the Green

Calf that she "couldn't get a wink o' sleep nohow; what with 'is cough and the worritin' o' the child, it a'most drives me crazy." Whereupon she quaffed her cheap nepenthe. "Ah!" said a stout and dirty matron, whose husband sold cats'-meat by day and played the concertina by night; "Ah! ma'am, we all 'as our crosses to bear, and your 'usband's yours," which pious sentiment found favour with all present, who sighed in unison.

The wife of the man who lay in the basement of Sheridan-buildings had just reached that place when she remembered the medicine which the doctor had instructed her to call for three hours previously. She decided, somewhat irresolutely, that it was too late to get it now; the surgery certainly was a long way off—nearly as far as the Green Calf, and that was closed. So the man stayed awake for want of an anodyne, and the woman slept, having no need of one.

At daybreak the sufferer attempted to rise to go to his toil; the sodden hides lay waiting to be scraped; there was urgent need of them, for the carriages of the rich were in want of upholstery; but Nature at length ordained that he should rest—at least that he should not work; so he lay idly in bed and watched the woman going grumblingly about her duties. Later she made the announcement that she must go out and get a breath of air lest she be laid up herself, and no one to do a thing for anybody. So, in order to obviate this undesirable chance, she just ran round to have a word with Mrs. Limber, that poor soul whose husband died seven months ago come Christmas—and that without having paid up his club money, "as true as you're a living creature." The capacious relict of William Limber had "just stepped out to get a drop o' stout, ma'am—it 'elps your stomach wonderful at this time o' day, it do," and the helpmate of the sick man kindly volunteered to go and "see if she's agettin' the right sort—for, bless you, my dear, the quality is that different you'd never believe."

Alone on his wretched bed, in his wretched room, lay the worker, taking his rest. The discordant noises of the street distracted him; the slamming of doors, shouting of children, the clatter of carts, the clamour of bells and gongs, the shrieking of whistles, the rattle of shunting trucks, the roar of trains, the bawling of costers, and the thunder of passing traction engines, mingled with every other conceivable and inconceivable din, together made a hideous uproar comparable with the orchestra of hell. He must have listened to it for years, but never before had he even noticed it, much less been worried by it; now high fever had given him nerves, and through dim eyes he saw clearly.

In the awful hours of the night the deepest tragedy of his tragic life came to him and was his. He noted for the first time the unnecessary squalor of the room; it cried out to him in its foulness, and in the balance of his limited understanding he weighed his wife and found her wanting.

Through the weary hours he strove with the might of the fever which had power upon him, afflicting him grievously with a sore thirst. His mind, weakened and broken by the virulence of the malady, wandered in labyrinths of inco-ordinated imaginings. Like Falstaff, he babbled of

green fields and chattered idly of bygone deeds and days. Presently the thought of his neglected work obtruded itself, and he again attempted to rise and dress that he might go to his daily task. As he fumbled about with his clothing the fretful wailing of the hungry and neglected child stirred his slumbering sense of pity, and he got up and staggered into the adjoining room in search of his wife.

Here he discovered, not the woman he sought but a base possession of hers—a bottle of gin, purchased with hard-earned money taken from his pocket while he slept. The child momentarily ceasing to cry, he straightway forgot its existence and seized upon the bottle which, to him, contained merely something to drink. His thirst was terrible and he took a long draught. The pungent and fiery liquid brought back his wandering mind to familiar paths; he gazed about him; again the child cried for its mother, and again the man took cognisance of her unwarrantable absence.

He drank again—deeply and without thought. With the stimulus of the spirit came keenness to his mind and strength to his body; there came also an utter recklessness. Without apparent effort he dressed himself, drained the last drop from the bottle, forgot once more the need of the child, and forthwith made his way into the street.

Within the public bar of the Green Calf was a right jovial assembly, gathered together for the exchange of confidences and the comfortable alleviation of thirst. Leaning over the counter were several workmen, taking rest from their labours. Scattered about the floor were half a dozen small tables, and at each of them sat two or three slipshod women; round the bar were forms, and on these also sat females of various ages and sizes, but all in agreement as to their dirty and degraded appearance. Just above them, running along the wall and within easy reach, was a narrow shelf, whereon rested the glasses during the brief intervals of non-use. The floor was covered with a thick layer of filthy sawdust as a concession to the demands of hygiene and serving to deaden the sound of uncontrolled feet. The bar was brilliantly illuminated, and three youths, with white faces and abundantly oiled hair, devoted their services to the manifold requirements of the ladies and gentlemen therein congregated. From the adjoining bar, borne on thick clouds of rank tobacco smoke, came the coarse conversation and coarser jests of its patrons.

The air was hot and intensely foetid, and was only kept supportable by the constant ingress and egress of customers and the accompanying opening and closing of the doors consequent thereon. At these salutary times the roar of the street broke upon the noise within like waves of a wild sea beating upon shingle; but, whereas the note of the sea is pure and sweet and wholesome, the uproar of this pestiferous place was foul, unwholesome, and horrible.

Mrs. Squole was there, talking volubly to her neighbour Mrs. Buddles. Her husband honestly earned the money she was spending, she would say that for him. "A good, steady man; never touches a drop hisself, ma'am—but, in course, he hasn't to look after the house and six children—the eldest only eight—to say nothing of the lodger, as 'asn't paid a penny o' rent for seven weeks, ma'am, as true as you're a living soul!"

Mrs. Dubber also—good, honest soul, who “really can’t abide spirits, but the doctor, he says, ‘Mrs. Dubber,’ he says, ‘I won’t rob you no more—all you wants is a little drop of gin—’ot. Just a drop at night as medicine,’ ‘e says, ‘for I know if you wasn’t ill you wouldn’t touch it—no, not if you was paid to.’” Mrs. Pimp likewise swelled the assembly—Louisa Pimp, whose first husband died raving, whose second emigrated to Siberia, and whose third smilingly told the judge that ten years’ penal servitude was the softest job he had struck since he was married.

The conversation was going more merrily than a marriage bell; the latest jest was being responded to with shouts of laughter; the beer-engines were working intermittently; a man in the adjoining bar was lifting up his voice in song, his auditors keeping time with their feet; a belated piper outside was giving a bad taste of his quality; and at short intervals the roar of the street beat in like waves of an angry sea.

They all looked up as he entered, for with him came visibly a greater Presence. The swing-doors closed behind him, and for a moment he stood quite still, dazed by the noise and blinded by the smoke and light; his face was flushed with high fever, his eyes preternaturally bright. As he gazed about irresolutely his wife, raising her eyes, saw before her the worn and stricken figure of her husband.

“Hullo, Jack!” she asked, “what’s up—anything wrong?”

“No, it’s all right,” he answered; “I felt a bit better, so I thought I would just look in.”

“Well, that’s what I call being a sensible chap—if you’d listened to me sooner and taken a drop now and then you’d never have took sick; here, have a drop o’ this.”

Never before that night had the man tasted any alcoholic liquor, and it was a great delight to his degraded wife to see him emptying glass after glass, until he shortly became oblivious to his surroundings.

For one brief moment only did his mind revert to its original sweet sanity, and that was when a child, deposited in a bundle on the floor, cried for its mother. He was in the act of drinking when the feeble wail was heard, and for that precious moment he was once again a man, stricken with mortal illness, but forgetting his own sore need in remembering the need of a child.

He stopped and set down his glass and turned to the abandoned infant, gazing upon it with infinite tenderness. It was his last noble impulse in the world. The fumes of strong drink dulled his brain, some other train of thought wandered through his mind and obliterated the past, and once more he drank, more heavily than before.

Some time after midnight the stars, keeping their quiet watch, were witness to a grievous thing. Into a squalid street, devoid of traffic and deserted save by the dissolute and unprofitable, came from the bar of a gin-palace a sorry medley of men and women. They hung about the doors for a space, then drifted apart and went reluctantly to their homes.

The last to come out were a man and his wife; arm-in-arm and shouting a vulgar ballad, they reeled into the road and staggered away in the direction of Sheridan-buildings, Tabard-street, S. E.